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Mary Pickering, *Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography*

Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography by Mary Pickering; Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography by Mary Pickering

Review by: By John Tresch

*The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 83, No. 3 (September 2011), pp. 668-672

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/660331>

Accessed: 07/05/2013 12:58

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defeating the Commune end the confusion, because under the Third Republic the French soldier had to become the instrument of both middle-class democracy and modern warfare. Years of fallout from the Dreyfus affair showed just how susceptible the French army proved to internal political quarrels dating back to the Revolution.

According to Forrest's argument, the Great War of 1914–18 definitively broke the myth of the soldier of the Year II. Here, the footing of the book seems to become less sure because of some problematic ways in which he reads recent historiography. He is quite correct that most French soldiers, like most of the French, did not enthusiastically embrace war in August 1914. I also share his sense that overt references to the Revolutionary legacy became fewer and further between as the war dragged on. But I wonder whether he underestimates the adaptability of that tradition to industrialized warfare. Historians attached to the *Historial de la Grande Guerre*, to whom Forrest makes frequent and generous reference, have long been interested in the complex roots and manifestations of consent. Consent, or "patriotic consent" as the term sometimes has it, is far more involved than basic nationalism and involves a commitment to fighting the war that actually deepened with adversity.

In the case of France, the literature on consent suggests that the Revolution and the whole republican project did its work far more thoroughly than Forrest suggests. To be sure, in external appearance, the *poilu* of 1917 did not much resemble his forebear of the Year II. But in the mutinies of 1917, he decided to continue the war when no external force existed to compel him to do so. The reason, I have argued, revolved around an interiorized political identity directly traceable to the Revolution. It is simply a misstatement of my argument in *Between Mutiny and Obedience* (1994), reiterated and expanded upon in multiple other venues, to contend with citation that in 1917 "the soldiers' consent to the war finally snapped" (204). Forrest is not the first anglophone historian to misinterpret my views on consent in this way, and I fear he will not be the last.

I also wonder if the endgame of the war in Algeria demonstrates the *longue durée* influence of the Revolutionary legacy better than Forrest suggests. On April 23, 1961, President Charles de Gaulle, bedecked in his 1940s-era military uniform, forbade any of the French, first of all the conscripts fighting in Algeria, to obey any orders from the generals plotting a coup in Algiers. He appealed to them not just as citizens, nor just as soldiers, but as both. Perhaps the impact of the Revolution proved most profound when it was so recoded as to become almost invisible.

LEONARD V. SMITH

*Oberlin College*

**Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography**, volume 2. By *Mary Pickering*.

Auguste Comte Intellectual Biography.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. xiv+638. \$95.00 (cloth); \$76.00 (Adobe eBook Reader).

**Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography**, volume 3. By *Mary Pickering*.

Auguste Comte Intellectual Biography.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. xiv+667. \$95.00.

Auguste Comte's tortured life and perplexing philosophy embodied the paradoxes of the nineteenth century. He saw the progress of humanity as leading away from theology and metaphysics and toward science, yet wound up creating a new religion

with its own temples, prayers, and rites. His arguments in favor of liberal reform and minimizing the role of government accompanied a loathing for parliamentary and rights-based politics. While arguing for the “liberation” of workers and women, he gave both groups a subordinate role, grounded in nature, as organs of the Great Being of Humanity. He taught mechanics, yet his greatest scientific contributions were in the theory of the organism and the milieu. He grounded his philosophy in the real, natural, given order of nature, yet showed this order to be artificial, relative, and dependent on the needs of humans. He advocated a cosmopolitan international order yet saw France as the bearer of a unique world-historical destiny. Though he was one of the greatest contributors to the philosophy of progress, Comte embraced traditions from Catholicism and humanity’s fetishistic past.

Over the course of her epic, three-volume *Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography*, Mary Pickering follows out these contradictions, connects them to wider historical and intellectual developments, and nevertheless makes a convincing case for the unity and continuity of Comte’s work. Comte himself spoke of a first career, focused on explaining the progress, limits, and connections among the sciences, marked by his *Course of Positive Philosophy* (1830–42), and of a second career, in which he established the cult, dogma, and regime of the “Religion of Humanity,” which would guide humanity all over the world to its final (though never complete) stage of development. Many authors, including several of Comte’s greatest promoters, have treated his second career as an aberration, as the result of his periodic fits of madness; yet Pickering demonstrates that Comte’s views on science—so decisive for the French tradition of *épistémologie*, which includes Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem, and Michel Foucault and which is in many ways more compelling than the neopositivism of the Vienna Circle—were from the start inseparable from his aim of refunding the social order through the creation of a new intellectual authority, a new “spiritual power.” Far from a proponent of pure, objective, socially neutral science, Comte launched the discipline he named “sociology” as an inquiry into a given stage of civilization’s state of knowledge and key functions; he cast the history and philosophy of science as a means of guiding interventions to hasten social progress. Comte’s life and work are particularly relevant now in an intellectual moment described by many as “postpositivist,” in which connections between politics, science, and technical expertise remain at the fore of public concern.

The first volume of this biography appeared in 1995; the last two appeared simultaneously in 2009. Although it joins a steadily increasing flow of work on Comte in both French and English (by, among others, Annie Petit, Juliette Grange, Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent, Michel Serres, Laurent Fedi, Jean-François Braunstein, Michel Bourdeau, Angèle Kremer-Marietti, Mike Gane, Andrew Wernick, and Robert Scharff), Pickering’s is the most complete work on Comte’s life and thought available in any language. It mines published texts, unpublished writings and correspondence, state archives, and both recent and older secondary literature to offer reliable explanations of nearly everything Comte ever wrote, correlating each moment of his intellectual evolution to the vicissitudes of his personal life, professional situation, and political context. Its extensive notes, bibliography, and numerous discoveries demonstrate considerable patience and care (the word “endurance” comes to mind). This will be a definitive reference for anyone working on Comte or Positivism. While Pickering offers a perspective particularly rewarding for social scientists interested in this neglected founder, the work also has much to offer historians and philosophers of science, historians of France, and general historians of modernity.

Most striking is Pickering's recurrent focus on Comte's unique superposition of science, politics, and religion. Historians are increasingly attuned to the deep and varied currents of religious thought in Europe during a century that is still too often defined by the rise of secularism and the "conflict between science and religion," to use John William Draper's cliché of 1872. Beyond the continued potency of traditional religions—including a Catholic revival in post-Revolutionary France—the nineteenth century saw the appearance of many "secular religions" (D. G. Charlton's phrase) and spiritualist movements that confronted and incorporated scientific methods (Alex Owen, Alison Winter, Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett, and Pamela Thurschwell have studied the English fascination for the occult, while French spiritualism has been explored by Lynn Sharp, John Monroe, Bernard Méheust, and Christine Blondel). Though he eschewed mysticism, Comte belongs in this constellation. One factor frequently cited for the "rise of secularization" is the growing authority of science. Comte's priesthood of scientists administering a sociologically justified system of rites and ethical prescriptions bends this thesis back upon itself. Focusing on the activities, ideas, and emotions that tie humans together, Comte saw society and religion as identical; his nontheological view of religion announced the theme that would become central to sociological thought from Emile Durkheim and Claude Lévi-Strauss through to Pierre Bourdieu.

In the biography's first volume, Pickering presented many important discoveries: these included Comte's readings of Kant, Herder, and Hegel in translations by his student Gustave D'Eichtahl and his debts to Saint-Simon (downplayed by both Comte and his earlier biographer, Henri Gouhier), such as the view of history as a physiological series and the balance between spiritual and temporal powers— notions given greater rigor and analytical coherence by Comte. It also described Comte's volatile relations with other followers of Saint-Simon, the Catholic socialist Frédéric de La Mennais, and contemporary scientists, including naturalist Henri de Blainville (whose concept of the animal series provided Comte with the skeleton for his hierarchy of the sciences), as well as John Stuart Mill, highlighting the reciprocal influence between these philosophical reformers.

The second volume shows the development of Comte's thought through the political tumult of the 1840s and the revolution of 1848, examining the transformation of Positivism into an explicitly religious movement. Foremost among its contributions is a fascinating chapter detailing the calendars, rites, prayers, flags, temples, and sacraments of the new religion, placing these theatrical and propagandistic projects within the rise of a spectacular commercial public culture. The third volume looks in detail at Comte's relationships with his disciples, his *Système de politique positive*, the difficulties he faced in his last years and his vast influence. Its summary of the neglected *Système* and of the recondite *Subjective Synthesis*—containing Comte's first effort to reimagine all sciences from the point of view of human emotions and the needs of society, starting with mathematics, along with his fantastic concepts of the Great Being (humanity), Great Milieu (space), and Great Fetish (the earth) as objects of worship—is particularly helpful. Further, Pickering's is the first detailed study of the Positivist religion as a social movement. She has unearthed numerous correspondences and internal documents to give a sense of the volatile and intense relationships between this self-appointed High Priest of Humanity and his often wayward and quarrelsome disciples, many of whom came from the lower and working classes. He took on the role of confessor and spiritual guide, giving advice on prayer and ethics and counseling on personal difficulties and sexual frustrations.

Politically, Comte's philosophy sits easily on neither the left nor the right. Pickering tracks his paternalistic appeals to republicans and workers whose love of authority and lack of interest in politics he took for granted, as well as his tactical appeals to conservatives and potential donors. She provides fascinating detail on the spread of Positivism as a form of socialism among workers in Lyons, as well as its fluctuating reception among forward-thinking Brits, including early enthusiasm from David Brewster and Mill, followed by John Herschel's debunking of his scientific errors and his stumblings with Harriet Martineau, who translated and condensed the *Cours* into an accessible two volumes.

Equally significant is Pickering's painstaking reconstruction of Comte's personal life: we learn about his headstrong yet supportive wife, Caroline Massin, whose past as a prostitute, bookseller, and republican muse did not prepare her for life with the future High Priest of Humanity. We learn more here than in any previous study about Comte's periodic mental breakdowns and stays in mental institutions (where he was treated by Esquirol and his pupils, one source of his enmity toward psychiatry and introspective psychology that strengthened his interest in phrenology, as discussed in Jan Goldstein's *Post-Revolutionary Self*). We are provided with an exceptionally nuanced depiction of the legendary Clotilde de Vaux, whose intense and platonic one-year relationship with Comte spurred him to give central importance to the emotions. Rather than a blank slate for Comte's projections and sublimated desire, she comes forward as a complex and lively figure, one who reflected insightfully on the condition of women in the nineteenth century and the difficulties they faced in claiming economic and intellectual independence. In place of the idealized saint whom Comte worshipped after her death, in Pickering's account Clotilde comes forward as an early feminist and as a novelist who considered George Sand both a model and a rival.

Another fascinating narrative strand is Comte's lifelong interactions with his teachers, comrades, and students at the Ecole Polytechnique. Drawing on work by Bruno Belhoste, Antoine Picon, and others, the biography suggests that this hothouse of technical proficiency and republican ideology was also the laboratory for the social sciences and progressive reform movements of the 1830s and 1840s. The school was a constant presence in Comte's life; he saw it as a model for the spiritual power, and for decades he struggled to earn a living there as teaching assistant and examiner. Pickering demonstrates the density of the social networks linking polytechnical training and movements of social reform of the 1830s and 1840s. Like Philippe Regnier's studies of the Saint-Simonians, Jonathan Beecher's work on Charles Fourier and Victor Considerant, and Naomi Andrews's work on the role of women in the works of closely related socialist thinkers, she shows how the theories and prognostications of those whom Frank Manuel named the "Prophets of Paris" emerged through constant debate, dialogue, and competition for the ear of bourgeois supporters, state authorities, wealthy benefactors, and diverse segments of the nascent working class. Comte's case makes particularly clear the link between the newly recognized power of science and technology and utopian socialists' projects of "social engineering." Pickering's frequent comparisons between Comte and Marx are apt, as are the connections she shows between Comte and the Fourierists, Auguste Blanqui, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.

We see clearly how Comte's strained relations with politicians, patrons, and friends derived from his refusal to accept any authority but his own. This prickly, imperious, self-sabotaging teacher—at one point Pickering calls him a "nineteenth-century drama queen"—was probably not someone from whom you would want to take a course of astronomy, much less put at the helm of spaceship Earth. Nevertheless, Pickering

astutely shows the combination of personal need and “altruism”—one of several now-familiar terms Comte coined—that brought him a small but devoted clutch of followers and that allowed the eventual spread and influence of his philosophy not only in France and Europe but in the United States and, most significantly, in Latin America.

Comte’s own writings are forbidding; the three weighty tomes of this biography, totaling nearly 2,000 pages and tacking between episodes in the life of an extremely difficult man and dutiful discussions of dense and often arid works, will not necessarily bring him new fans. Though it would be entirely understandable if, after thirty years of research and writing about Comte, Pickering chose to put him down for a while (perhaps exercising the same “cerebral hygiene” toward his work that Comte used to protect his brain from contemporary authors), no one would be better qualified than she to provide a concise overview of his intellectual development, influences, and impact. Issues raised by Comte remain central, from the political impact of science and technology to the complexities of “secularism,” and his influence is massive if poorly recognized. A brief summary of his life and work abstracted from these three volumes would be extremely valuable for English-language readers.

Mary Pickering’s biography of Auguste Comte brings together for the first time the wide range of materials needed for an informed rethinking of a crucial figure in the history of several disciplines and intellectual movements, one with a decisive impact on the relations among science, religion, and politics in the modern world. She is to be congratulated for bringing this ambitious reconstruction to a satisfying conclusion.

JOHN TRESCH

*University of Pennsylvania*

### **Gender and Justice: Violence, Intimacy, and Community in Fin-de-Siècle**

**Paris.** By *Eliza Earle Ferguson*. Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, volume 1.

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. Pp. xii+268. \$60.00.

Historians of the everyday have long sought archival access to that most elusive space of daily existence: ordinary peoples’ intimate relationships. In *Gender and Justice: Violence, Intimacy, and Community in Fin-de-Siècle Paris*, Eliza Earle Ferguson employs testimony from assize court files compiled for the investigation and prosecution of “crimes of passion”—understood broadly as “a [violent] crime between a couple, whether married or not” (1)—to uncover the material and emotional ties that bound poor Parisians to each other. At the same time, Ferguson uses this testimony to suggest that the working poor generally did not see “crimes of passion” as acts of madness or “a love story gone awry,” as they were so often depicted in the popular press or expert literature (1). Instead, the author contends that working-class communities in Paris viewed many of these attacks, even the most gruesome or lethal, as rational, instrumental uses of violence. “Intimate violence,” Ferguson argues, “is crucial to the history of gender and gendered power relations in the household. It is a key practice in testing and enforcing the bounds of acceptable behavior for men and women, a tool largely but not exclusively used by men” (16). An attack on a partner thus “functioned within an encompassing ethic of reciprocity” and was seen as “a legitimate tool in resolving conflicts . . . if it performed a punitive or retributive function” (132).